

Year A, the 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 21)  
September 27, 2020  
The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

“Is the Lord among us or not?”

Good morning. Here we are at Town Hall in Blue Hill. I chose this backdrop because (mostly), it is warmer and a lot less windy than under the Deer Isle Bridge! Maybe that is why trolls are cranky, it is cold under bridges. But I also chose this spot because it is a symbol of our public life together, and our public life together is strained. Not right here, perhaps, not today, but in some places...

Now I know everyone is not thrilled that I so regularly discuss our political situation. I am sorry if you are uncomfortable with that. I do this mostly for pastoral reasons. It is a troubling time, and there is a lot of upset within our virtual walls about the state of things. Some of us are upset unto despair. And despair is the mind killer. To find a way, to even begin to seek hope, let alone find it, we have to make meaning of our situation.

Jesus speaks about politics all the time. Really, politics is just about how we organize ourselves, how we get along and make decisions together. Our gospel today is an example. This pericope is about the conflict between Jesus and the Chief Priests and Elders, the Sadducees. The Sadducees were the temple government, the Jewish power elite, which had as much secular reach as it did spiritual. In this scene, they were trying to entrap Jesus, getting Him to say some cross-worthy blasphemy so they could convince Rome of His seditious mission and execute Him. It doesn't get much more political than that.

And that phenomenon of our spiritual lives being tied up with our communal lives goes much further back than that. Moses was the leader of the Hebrew people in the Exodus. God tapped him. People go to their leaders with their needs, and conflict arises when those needs are not met. In the story last week, they grumbled about food. This week they complain about not having water, they are thirsty. All these needs! People!?! And that is no different than right now. If we look out across the American landscape, myriad needs, be you deep red or bright blue or in the middle purple, certainly black and brown, all sorts of needs are not being met, haven't been met for a very long time. And there is grumbling, so much grumbling. So guided by our scripture, let's try to make some meaning.

Have you ever heard of family systems theory? It comes from the field of organizational behavior as a way of understanding how groups of people work (or don't work). We learn about it

in seminary because this theory posits that groups of people work in many of the same ways that families do. We talk of church as a family. Behavioral researchers agree! What is important today from that world is the concept of “presenting issues.”

The presenting issue is the problem at hand, the one that is presenting itself, but is not the root cause. Your child starts acting out: drinking, problems at school, missing curfew whatever. Maybe that is the problem; wrong crowd, too many distractions, broken watch, and there is nothing deeper going on. That is entirely possible. Maybe, though, there is a deeper reason. They are being bullied; trauma is being revealed; a behavior health problem is emerging. Inwardly, they are wrestling with their sexuality or gender identity or whatever the root cause is, but the outward and visible sign of that disturbance manifests as Fs in Spanish, multiple speeding tickets or screaming at mom every morning. That is what “presenting issue” is all about.

In Exodus, thirst is the presenting issue. At other times it was food, the Egyptians on their heels, and boredom with the day after day manna diet. Like thirst, those are also actual needs, certainly, and that could be the end of the story, but we don’t keep telling stories like this for 3000 years to pass on the wisdom that you get thirsty in the desert, or that you get hungry if there is no food. There are deeper meanings in this story.

In St. Matthew’s Gospel, the Saducees, do they really care about where the authority of John’s baptism comes from? No. Well, maybe academically, but they didn’t crucify people over academic issues. They felt threatened by Jesus. That was the problem. Their positions of power and responsibility were threatened when the status quo was threatened. They were the status quo, Jesus threatened it. This argument about John’s baptism is the presenting issue, the real issue is their fear of Jesus as an agent of change.

Maybe the current disruptions in our civil life could be analyzed in similar terms. Our problems are manifesting as Black lives matter v. the police, Antifa v. Proud Boys, keep your word v. fill that seat, concerns about the sanctity of elections and a peaceful transfer of power. There is such a variety of experiences and concerns that can rightly be called this American life. But maybe those are presenting issues of much larger currents, much larger brokenness and attending needs. Exodus is helpful here.

Yes, the people of Israel wanted water. But at the root, they wanted to know that God was with them, that they were on the right path. They felt awfully alone out in the desert. They were free from slavery, but when they left those bonds they left a lot of other things, too, like reliable of food and water; like houses to live in. These were town people, not frontiers folk. They had left

everything that was familiar for the wilderness. The questions and doubts they must have had. Had they made the right choice? Would things ever be normal, familiar again? Would there ever be a time that they wouldn't have to be scraping the ground for manna or waiting for rocks to be supernaturally split open to get a drink?

That sounds a lot closer to home than the Wilderness of Sin usually reads. I'd love to shake someone's hand when I come to visit and see my dad after his knee surgery last week. I'd love to see a scene in a movie depicting a whole bunch of people and not have "wow they are awfully close together" come into my mind. I don't want to have to brace myself for scary or soul crushing news every time I open the newspaper. I know you know those feelings. We want it to be normal. And it won't be, can't be for a long time. Those are a lot of the same feelings that are behind the grumbling of Israel. It is those feelings, the doubts and the worries, the longings and the honest to goodness needs that beg the real question, "Is the Lord among us or not?" Which could be another way of asking, "Is there hope?"

For a lot of folks, right now, it is not working. I believe that is what is behind this. It, this country, is not working for most of us. Our economy, health care system, schools and tattered social safety net, a deteriorating environment made obvious in the ongoing record temperatures, record fires, record hurricane seasons. This pandemic is disproportionately killing the poor and people of color. Our endless wars. Wages stagnant for decades for most while un-Godly wealth concentrates in the hands of very, very few. The quality of so many aspects of our life together has decreased markedly in my lifetime, and I was born during Viet Nam, my first birthday was two weeks after Watergate. That should have been a low point for our nation! Look around now. "Is the Lord among us or not?"

Where's the hope? This is the time for our poetic interlude. It is from St. Paul's letter to the Philippians, which is the appointed Epistle for today. It is likely that Paul is quoting these verses from a very, very early hymn.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death--  
even death on a cross.  
Therefore God also highly exalted him  
and gave him the name  
that is above every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

The Israelites despaired. "It would never be the same again!" "We are going to die!"

Both of which are true, but to different ends than they suspected. Despair is being certain that it will not work out, it is the opposite of hope. (It comes from Latin de- down from sperare- to hope). The opposite of faith is not doubt, it is certainty. O the hubris of certainty! Knowing that it is going to be a disaster... there is no hope in that. There is no God in that, because having true faith in God means knowing that we never know the end of the story, knowing that all things are possible in God, not matter how unlikely. It takes a lot of faith to rest into that.

You will learn over the coming years that I speak about humility a lot. Not that we are incapable of seeing right, doing right, having true faith. No, I speak of humility in that we are capable of telling truth from lies, right from wrong, taking the narrow path when we should, but that we are all far too willing and able and guilty of still doing it wrong, even though we know better. I preach humility because we are conscious of our trespasses and trespass anyway; we should be humble in that light. We are all guilty of sins, some of us terrible ones, and all of us have been the beneficiaries of terrible, mortal sins, done by others, yes, but on our behalf, to our benefit. It takes a heap of humility to admit that we been doing wrong, and another heap to repent, to change the direction of our lives. Where does the strength, the courage, the humility come to do this?

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And being found in human form,  
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The word "emptied" here is in Greek, kenosis, and it is a very important concept, central to the mystical heritage of the Church. We'll get to it, but not in depth today. The self-

emptying, humbling way that is the way of Jesus Christ; that is the way of our salvation, that is making real the commonwealth of God right now, is to remember that it is not about you. What is good for you is not necessarily good for everyone. What is good for me might be very bad, unto death kind of bad for someone else. We might share the same fears with another and come to very, very different conclusions about what to do about it. This is not to create some false equivalency that all opinions are equal (or are equally tainted with hubris). Rather it is to put us in an existential posture of humility, that it is not up to us, or up to anyone to know the outcomes of the world. Nothing is pre-ordained. Nothing is set in stone, besides the knowledge that God loves you, loves everyone, and is just waiting like an expectant parent at 2 am on a Saturday night, furious and anxious and worried and loving, all at the same time, waiting for us to turn around and come home.

The issues presenting themselves all around us are scary. The root causes that these issues illuminate are deeply embedded in our society, they may seem intractable, but they are not. You don't know the way out. Neither do they. Set aside despair with the true knowledge of human limitation, and of our blessedness. There is a way, Jesus Christ. "Let the same mind be in you..." AMEN